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Beth Emet The Free Synagogue
Makhloket L'shem Shamayim: Argument for the Sake of Heaven
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The story is told of the first Shabbat a rabbi spends at her new congregation. When it comes time for the *Shema*, half the congregation rises, half sits. After the service ends, each side comes running to the rabbi to tell her that they are doing it right. “We always sit for the *Shema*,” one side yells. “No, we always stand,” the other side retorts. As each side is arguing why their position is right, the rabbi turns to the past president, a wise and trusted source in the community, and asks, “So what is the custom?” The president looks at the arguing factions and says, “This is the tradition!”

Argumentation and disagreement are hallmarks of Jewish tradition. As the old saying goes: two Jews, three opinions.

Consensus, or acceptance of gospel, or received truth, are not upheld as Jewish ideals, but civility, humility and intelligence are.

This value is encapsulated by this lesson from the Talmud:

For three years there was a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel. Beit Shammai would say, ‘The *halachah*—Jewish law—is in agreement with our views.’ Beit Hillel contended, ‘The *halachah* is in agreement with our views.’ Then a *bat kol*, a heavenly voice announced: ‘*Elu v’elu divrei Elohim chayim*, these and these—the teachings of both groups—are the words of the living God.’¹

The debates between these two schools of thought—Hillel and Shammai—are held up as the model of how to argue within our tradition. Their arguments are considered *l’sheim shamayim*—for the sake of heaven—because they seek to deepen our understanding of an issue and are for the betterment of the community as a whole.

The debates between these two schools of thought are contrasted with Korach’s challenge to Moses’ leadership in the Book of Numbers. Korach and his band are fed up with Moses and claim Korach should be the leader of the Israelites. Korach, however, loses his bid to usurp Moses; the ground opens up beneath his followers and him and they are swallowed up. Korach’s failed rebellion is the antithesis of the way we should argue with each other. His challenge to Moses’ leadership is the height of arrogance; Korach is not interested in what’s in the best interests of the Israelites, but in having his own ego needs for power filled.²

Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai style argumentation was sorely lacking in the debate over the Iran deal this summer. Name calling, fear mongering, and characterizing one’s opponents as enemies beyond the pale were rampant.

¹ Talmud Bavli Eruvin 13b.

² Pirke Avot 5:20.

Nostalgia, the impulse to simplify, mythologize or romanticize the past, however, as Rabbi Knobel taught on Rosh HaShanah morning, is not in order here. The end of the Second Temple period which coincided with the beginning of the first millennium was one of the most contentious, divisive, and rancorous times in our history as a people. But in the period which followed, the rabbis seemed to draw a lesson from the acrimony of the preceding period. The rabbinic period was marked by a flourishing of thoughtful and intelligent debate, exemplified by the schools of Hillel and Shammai, that shaped the Judaism that we practice today. I don't claim there were no contentious and mean-spirited debates among the rabbis of this period, but they often included a self-critique of their behavior.

Let's briefly recall the history of the end of 2nd Temple period—the years preceding the destruction of the 2nd Temple in the year 70 C.E. During this period there were four main, warring factions within the Jewish community: the Zealots who believed that armed warfare would save the Jews from the Roman onslaught, the Essenes who preferred to retreat to preserve their version of Judaism, the Sadducees who were working to maintain the status quo by appeasing the Romans, and the Pharisees, the nascent rabbis, who believed moderation and accommodation were the proper course of action.

The following story is told about how Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakkai, a Pharisee, saved Judaism as internecine battles within the Jewish community and tensions with the Romans escalated. The writing was on the wall that Jerusalem would be destroyed. The Sadducees were focused on keeping the sacrificial cult in the Temple going, the Essenes had fled to the Dead Sea, the Zealots, meanwhile, were fighting the Romans while the Pharisees were trying to find a moderate path.

The Talmud recounts:³

A group of Zealots were then in the city. The Rabbis said to them: "Let us go out and make peace with them [the Romans]." The Zealots would not let them, but on the contrary said, "Let us go out and fight them." The Rabbis said: "You will not succeed." The Zealots then rose up and burnt the stores of wheat and barley so that a famine ensued [and the Jews would be forced to fight]...

Abba Sikra, the leader of the Zealots of Jerusalem, was the nephew of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai. [Rabban Yochanan] sent to him, saying, "Come privately to me." When he came, [Rabban Yochanan] said to him: "How long will you continue this and kill everyone with starvation?"

He [Abba Sikra] said to him, "What can I do? If I say anything to them [i.e., to the other Zealots], they will kill me!"

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said to him, "Devise some way for me to escape [the besieged city of Jerusalem]; perhaps I shall be able to save a small portion."

³ Talmud Gittin 56a-b.

[Rabban Yochanan then escaped Jerusalem in a coffin carried by his students who claimed that he had died and they needed to leave the walled city to bury their teacher.] Once outside the city, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai met with the Roman general Vespasian.] ...

[Vespasian] said to [Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai]: “I am going now and someone else will come in my place. But you may make a request of me, and I shall grant it.” Rabban Yochanan said, “Give me Yavneh and its scholars.”

Yavneh is where the rabbis reinterpreted and reinvented Judaism without the Temple at the center. Yochanan Ben Zakkai’s approach didn’t prevent the destruction of the Temple, but it did save Judaism.

Yochanan Ben Zakkai was not without his critics:

Rabbi Yosef – some say Rabbi Akiva – applied to him [Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai] the verse: “[God] turns wise men backwards and makes their knowledge foolish” (Yeshayahu 44:25). For he should have said to [Vespasian], “Let [the Jews] off this time.” But [Rabban Yochanan] thought that so much would not be granted him, such that [if he were to make such a request] even a little would not be saved.⁴

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, a recently deceased, revered Orthodox rabbi who was head of the Etzion Yeshiva in Israel taught that Yochanan Ben Zakkai’s moderate approach saved the Jewish people:

“Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai elects to make a smaller request in order to be certain that his request will be approved. His calculation is realistic, pragmatic, practical, and based on facts. He makes his calculation out of uncertainty as to what exactly the Romans will be prepared to allow. This leader of Israel adopts a self-consciously cautious approach: the spiritual future of the Jewish nation is not to be gambled with, and we do not ignore realistic, practical considerations. Sometime we are even prepared to suffice with “saving a little,” so long as it is the more certain option.”⁵

What can we learn from the rancorous period that led up to the destruction of the 2nd Temple?

The schools of thought and methods of argumentation of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai emerged after the destruction of the Temple. This period, known as the rabbinic period, illustrates that strident positions don’t serve us well, thoughtful minority voices should be respected, and intelligent debate serves the best interests of the community.

We can take these important lessons into our community today where we are often short on compromise, civility, and intelligent discourse; we also learn that a realistic assessment of our power is necessary if we are to develop successful solutions to the issues we face as a community.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ From a *sicha* (lesson) delivered the 29th of Iyar 5770, May 13, 2010.

In an article a few weeks ago in the Israeli publication, *Ha'aretz*, Peter Beinart argues that the Iran deal discussion didn't create the divisions within the Jewish community, it merely exposed them. A further analysis of the 2013 Pew Study of the Jewish community notes the widening gap between Orthodox and older Conservative Jews and the rest of the Jewish community. The first group that represents about 20% of the community tends to be more inward focused. They have more in common with evangelical Protestants than with fellow Jews, expressing more conservative views on issues such as homosexuality and the size of government; they are also less than half as likely as other Jews to say that Israel and an independent Palestinian state can coexist peacefully. Younger and non-Orthodox Jews have a more open world view, are at ease in non-Jewish circles, and are more likely to identify as Democrats.⁶

Increasingly, most Jewish organizations seem to represent the more conservative elements in our community which is not the majority. This is the only way to explain why most Jewish organizations came out against the Iran deal even though the younger and more liberal parts of our community, which make up 80% of the Jewish community, overwhelmingly supported the deal.

But I'm not here this evening to talk about whether or not the Iran deal is a good deal. The deal is done, but the next fight in our community is bound to come soon. What's important now is not to impose a false unity on the Jewish community that belies our differences, but to figure out how to respect our diversity, recognizing that our differences can be a source of strength to our community if we harness them in a thoughtful manner.

What's lacking today is that there are not many places for these two groups to talk to each other.

In New York, the 92nd Street Y holds forums that bring divergent voices into conversation. Open Hillel began last year as a challenge to the restrictive policies of who can be invited to speak at Hillel. One of the reasons that I participate in the Chicago Board of Rabbis—an interdenominational group of rabbis—is that we have the opportunity for open discussion. A few years ago, we started to push ourselves to have more open and diverse conversations about Israel that cut across the political spectrum. We've had Jewish and Palestinian representatives from the Bereaved Parents Forum speak and this fall Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger and Palestinian activist Ali Abu Awwad will be coming to engage us in dialogue. We still have a long way to go in this effort, but I'm glad that my colleagues are committed to making this happen.

A number of years ago, the Jewish Federation in San Francisco convened a series of conversations on Israel to bring diverse elements of the Jewish community together. Will the Chicago Federation be able to serve this need? Will another organization emerge to do this here in Chicago?

⁶ Peter Beinart, "The American Jewish divide is about much more than Iran," *Ha'aretz*, 9/9/15.

I thought it was a mistake this past summer that the Chicago Federation board and several other Federations across the country took a stand on the Iran deal because Federations should be places where the diversity of our community comes together; this move undermined its function as a communal organization. When I first heard in July that the Chicago Federation was considering taking a stand, I sent the following letter to them:

“At times of partisan rancor such as this one, it is incumbent upon us to remember that the Federation’s main purpose is to support Jewish communal agencies and that it is an umbrella organization representing the totality of the Jewish community. Without a doubt, it is appropriate for the Federation to issue public statements on matters of international affairs when the safety and welfare of a Jewish community is at stake. But thoughtful and well-informed people—both here in the United States and in Israel—all of whom are deeply concerned with Israel’s safety, disagree on what is in Israel’s best interests with regard to the Iran deal. Under such contentious circumstances, it can only foment greater divisions within our community for the Federation to take a stand.

If our Federation wants to serve in a constructive role in this conversation, it should host public events that allow community members to hear from credible experts representing diverse perspectives on the merits and drawbacks of the agreement. Members of the community can then decide for themselves whether to support or oppose it.

There is no shortage of Jewish organizations taking partisan stands on the Iran deal. Organizations such as AIPAC and J Street provide ample opportunities for people in our community to express their opinions and to press their representatives in Washington to vote accordingly. Wading into such partisan political issues need not, and should not, be the purview of the Federation.”

When I expressed my dismay at the Federation board’s actions, several staff members came to my office to meet with me. They told me that those who have different perspectives need to come to the table if they want to be heard. The issue is that those who aren’t showing up at the table are young and/or alienated or disconnected from the organized Jewish community. If we want these people around the table, we need to create safe spaces where this can happen. Creating a big tent will take work and a commitment to uplifting diverse voices.⁷

We learn from Hillel and Shammai that diverse opinions matter. Both because we are likely to come up with wiser and more thoughtful responses to difficult issues, and also because we need to take seriously how we will lose the next generation of Jews if we don’t make space for their thoughts and opinions. The reason that J Street is the largest Jewish group on many college campuses today is because it’s the place where many young Jews can express their opinions. Despite the fact that other organizations outspend J Street by many magnitudes, J Street has captured the hearts and minds of many college

⁷ The Chicago Federations and Federations across the country do a lot of good work, supporting social service agencies, schools, congregations, and many people in need in our communities and around the world. My concern is that their taking partisan stands undermines their ability to represent and support the whole Jewish community in all its diversity.

students who care about Judaism and Israel. This is not a political statement about the correctness of J Street's positions, but a reflection of where young Jews feel comfortable.

Will we respond to the divisions in our community like Hillel and Shammai? Will we see that like Yohanan Ben Zakkai—a Pharisee—and Abba Sikra—a Zealot—we need each other? Will we create spaces in which this can happen?

A few months ago, a congregant brought me copies of a Jewish publication from 1981 with an article that raised the issue of the drawbacks of insisting on uniformity when discussing Israel in the Jewish community. He thought that Rabbi Knobel and I would like to read it.

I'd like to quote some of the most salient points for our discussion this evening:

“It has been argued that only the solid resistance by the Diaspora to Arab demands, and then to pressures within the American government, prevented or contained damage to Israel's cause. It could be argued with equal force that had American Jewry not gone along with all Israeli policies, had there been room for expressing alternative positions, Israeli tactics could have been correspondingly influenced and modified.”

“But, we are always reminded, now is not the time to be critical of Israeli policies, Israel is under threat, and this cannot be denied. But will the threat be contained by silence? Where is the proof that monolithic conformity can buy strength and security?”

“Should we be driven farther and farther in the direction of sanctioning specious conformity, or standing silent before a mounting succession of deeds for which there is no justification either in Jewish morality or in expediency? It is not enough that most Jews dissociate themselves from terrorist actions by small groups of other Jews... There must also be recognition that a government's policies of uncompromising territorial retention can lead to violent Arab resistance and then to unsanctioned vigilantism by Zealots.”⁸

These prophetic words were written 34 years ago by none other than our very own founding rabbi, Rabbi David Polish, who, let us recall, was compelled to found Beth Emet because of his Zionist positions. The timeliness of his remarks is uncanny. Rabbi Polish does not try to minimize Arab violence against Jews, but he urges us not to use this as an excuse to avoid looking internally at Israel's actions. Closing our eyes to difficult and complex realities does not make them disappear.

The drive toward uniformity of opinion within our community does not serve our interests or the interests of protecting Israel. Vibrant debate for the early rabbis led to the development of the Jewish tradition as we know it today. I would contend that vibrant debate today in our community will strengthen us and help us find creative and thoughtful solutions to the issues our community faces here in the U.S. and in Israel.

⁸ David Polish, “Assent or Dissent—Risks and Benefits,” *Reconstructionist Magazine*, Vol. XLVII, No. 7-8, 1981.

A Midrash, a rabbinic parable, tells this story about the creation of human beings.⁹

Rabbi Shimon said, "At the moment the Holy One chose to create the first human being, the ministering angels broke up into factions. Some of them said, "Create him," while others said, "Don't do it."

Lovingkindness said: Create him, for he will do acts of lovingkindness.

Truth said: Don't create him, for he is drenched in lies.

Righteousness said: Create her, for she will do much Tzedakah.

Peace said: Don't do it, for she is essentially quarrelsome.

What did the Holy One do? God cast Truth down to the earth.

The ministering angels said: Sovereign of the Universe, why do You shame truth which is the leader of Your court? But, the Midrash concludes with a verse from psalms: "Truth will arise from the earth." (Psalms 85:12)

What does it mean that God cast truth down to the earth and that truth thereafter should arise from the earth? The rabbis are trying to teach us that God has placed truth in the hands of human beings, not God. It is we who are responsible for ascertaining truth through our thoughtful and intelligent debate, not by looking to God to tell us. When we are stuck in narrow ways of thinking, truth eludes us, but when we argue *l'shem shamayim*—for the sake of heaven, meaning for the betterment of the world—truth will emerge. May our impassioned debates be in the service of truth and cause lovingkindness, righteousness and peace to flourish in our community, in our society, and in our world.

⁹ Genesis Rabbah 8:5